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Syria

The Kurds and the Syrian Regime

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Recent developments in northern Syria – particularly east of the Euphrates – carry grave implications for both the Kurdish condition and the broader Syrian situation. Let us examine these implications, beginning with the Kurdish issue.

The Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria now finds itself in a critical predicament, having lost a substantial portion of the territory it hitherto controlled. These losses include predominantly Kurdish enclaves located within largely Arab regions, such as Aleppo, as well as predominantly Arab areas east of the Euphrates, notably Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor. The principal cause of this setback lies in the Trump administration's abandonment of the alliance Washington had forged more than a decade ago with Syria's Kurdish forces in the fight against ISIS. Tom Barrack, the Trump administration's local representative, cynically declared that the usefulness of these Kurdish forces to Washington has "largely expired."

Once again, the Kurdish national movement is paying the price for its reliance on an ally whose unreliability is historically well established. In the early 1970s, the Kurdish movement in northern Iraq, led by the Barzani family, wagered on the support of the Shah of Iran against the Baathist regime. That gamble ended in disaster when the Shah stabbed the movement in the back after securing his own objectives through a deal with Baghdad. Having used the Kurdish movement as a card in his confrontation with Iraq, he got rid of it once his goals were achieved. Since the 1990s, the Barzani family has allied itself with yet another bitter enemy of the Kurdish people: the Turkish state. They will not support the forces led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northeastern Syria against Turkey and its allies, just as they do not support Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) forces in northern Iraq in the face of repeated Turkish incursions. Instead, they seek to extend their influence into northern Syria with Ankara's approval.

The PYD, for its part, is also reaping the consequences of the contradiction between its proclaimed principles and its actual practices. Although the party claims adherence to the anarchist ideas espoused by the leader of the PKK in the Turkish prison where he is detained, and subsequently adopted by his organization, it failed to establish genuine democratic self-rule in the Arab-majority areas it seized with US backing east of the Euphrates. Rather than empowering local communities, it imposed its authority in a manner widely perceived by the Arab population as Kurdish nationalist domination. This explains the rapid collapse of PYD-affiliated forces in those regions: local Arab tribes preferred to reintegrate into the Syrian state under the new Damascus regime, particularly as Washington shifted its support away from the Kurdish movement and toward the Syrian government. Had the Arab majorities in these regions experienced authentic democratic self-governance, they would undoubtedly have been willing to defend it against any attempt by a Damascus-based regime to dismantle it in order to reimpose centralized authority.

Turning to the Syrian situation more broadly, any observer of recent events cannot fail to notice the striking contrast between the new Syrian regime's posture toward Kurdish-controlled areas in the north and its stance toward the Israeli occupation and the Druze-majority region bordering the occupied Golan Heights in the south. This contrast evokes the slogan raised by the Palestinian resistance and the Lebanese National Movement in 1976, following the brutal intervention of Hafez al-Assad's regime to suppress them and extend Damascus's control over Lebanon with Washington's approval: "A lion [asad in Arabic] in Lebanon and a rabbit in the Golan." A similar characterization aptly describes the behaviour of Ahmed al-Sharaa's regime, which acts like a lion against the Kurds in the north while accommodating the Zionist state – going so far as to conclude security arrangements with it – despite its occupation of a strategic portion of Syrian territory for nearly half a century.

Whatever may be said about the undemocratic policies pursued by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in its drive to consolidate control over Syrian state territory – policies discussed previously (see ["Syria: Fishing in Troubled Waters"](#), 6 May 2025) – a fundamental distinction nonetheless exists from the standpoint of the new regime's interests

between, on the one hand, extending its authority over the predominantly Arab areas east of the Euphrates, along with their oil fields, which represent a vital source of revenue for the Syrian state, and on the other hand, the continuation of its campaign against Kurdish-majority regions in the north, despite the high potential cost in lives and resources such a campaign entails, and although it offers no meaningful benefit to the new regime in Damascus.

This raises an obvious question: why is HTS pursuing a battle it does not need, at a time when it faces far more pressing political and economic priorities – priorities that serve its own interests, let alone the country's? The answer lies plainly in the interests of the Turkish state. Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria constitutes a Turkish concern, rooted in its connection to the Kurdish national liberation movement that challenges the Turkish state itself from within. It is not, nor should it be, a Syrian concern. The involvement of the new Damascus regime in this conflict is simply another manifestation of its subservience to the Turkey-US alliance, just as the Assad regime was subordinate to the Iran-Russia axis. The principal beneficiary of this entire dynamic remains the Zionist government, whose regional power has been strengthened to an unprecedented extent.

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